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After Practice? Material Semiotic Approaches to Consumption and Economy

Abstract

The 'turn' to practice in social theory is proving influential in the sociological study of consumption (following Warde 2005). This paper joins current debates that appraise the contributions of this growing body of work, specifically its relationship with – and possible mode of succession to – cultural studies of consumption. It considers two claims about the impact and status of practice theoretic repertoires in consumption scholarship (Warde 2014). First, that they invite greater attention than the cultural turn to objects and technologies as material forces. Second, that they have not yet found ways to locate consumption in the context of wider economic processes. My central argument is that theories of practice offer a partial reading of materiality, and that engagement with a greater range of material semiotic approaches can help in making better links between consumption and economy. This argument is illustrated through reference to market *agencements*, the social life of things, and ontological politics. I suggest these perspectives are compatible with practice theoretic approaches and that taken together, they represent some promising responses to a suite of fundamental challenges confronting consumption studies. I conclude that theories of practice – plural – have not yet run their course as an approach to consumption and economy. The parameters of consumption scholarship are also considered alongside the relationships between political economy and cultural analysis.

Keywords consumption; market studies; material culture; theories of practice; ontological politics

Introduction

To the extent that the sociology of consumption can be said to have a history, it reflects wider currents in the social sciences. Early approaches tended to derive consumption from production, effectively rendering it an add-on to other concerns (the expansion of capital logic, mass culture). Growing interest in consumer culture was accompanied by a proliferation of accounts that focused more concretely on the process and experience of consumption. Cultural theories of various persuasions established a named sociology of consumption and underpin many of its foundational accounts (see Featherstone 2007). More recently, theories of practice have gained momentum (following Warde 2005) to influence contemporary developments in consumption studies. The appraisal of practice theoretic approaches, specifically their relationship with – and possible mode of succession to – the prevailing orthodoxy of cultural perspectives is now a key concern for the sociology of consumption (see the introduction to this special issue). This paper – which was given as a keynote address to the 2018 conference of the European Sociological Association (ESA) Consumption Research Network – joins these debates. It suggests that studies of consumption face a suite of challenges that result, at least in part, from their analytic separation from production. Specifically, it proceeds from the observation that practice theoretic approaches to consumption do not adequately account for the intersection of everyday life and political economy. My core argument is that material semiotic approaches – a family of theories that suggest 'the social' is constituted by relational and heterogenous practices – offer some promising avenues for reconciling

contemporary developments in consumption scholarship with understandings of broader economic processes.

While theories of practice are multiple, the sociology of consumption now draws principally on Alan Warde's (2005) synthesis, extension and application of ideas developed by Schatzki (1996) and Reckwitz (2002). Warde's invocation to view consumption as moment that occurs within and for the sake of practices has shifted and expanded the gaze of consumption studies. This manoeuvre directs attention away from 'consumer behaviour' or 'consumer culture' in favour of a focus on the organisation, dynamics and trajectories of practices. Activities that might not readily be thought of as 'consuming' are thus brought within the purview of consumption scholarship. Concomitantly, the biases and limitations of previous approaches are redressed by paying greater attention to routines, sequences of activity, inconspicuous forms of consumption, and the patterning and experiences of everyday life. In the c.15 years since Warde's landmark intervention, these developments have offered theoretical insight and analytic guidance across a number of empirical domains, including food and eating, media, branding, and environmental sustainability. The content and orientation of papers and debates in key fora for consumption studies (for example the *Journal of Consumer Culture* or the ESA Consumption Research Network), attest to the growing dominance of practice theoretic approaches (see Halkier et al. 2011, Warde 2014, Evans 2019).

The sociology of consumption, then, is at a crucial juncture. It is now credible to consider theories of practice as an alternative to the orthodoxy established under the cultural turn. On the one hand, they provide the basis for a new programme of research that has and will continue to reinvigorate the field (cf. Shove 2010, Warde 2014). On the other, it has been argued that further advances could be made by re-engaging with foundational debates in the sociology of consumption – including the pre-occupations of the cultural turn (cf. Welch 2017, Evans 2019). A useful summary of the status and contributions of practice theoretic repertoires to the study of consumption is offered by Warde (2014). I take two of his claims as my starting point. The first is that they invite greater attention than the cultural turn to objects and technologies as material forces. The second is that they have not yet found ways to locate consumption in the context of wider economic processes. My view in this paper is that these two claims should be considered concurrently. I suggest the difficulties that practice theoretic approaches to consumption have in engaging with economic processes stem from their partial and very particular treatment of materiality. Their reliance on a single version of practice theory means that they are well placed to elucidate the use of commodities in the practices of daily life but not 'the institutional or systemic conditions of existence of those practices' (Warde 2014:298). Greater engagement with a wider range of practice theories can help develop an integrative framework for analysing the links between everyday life and political economy.

The remainder of this paper is organised as follows. The next section discusses a suite of issues confronting the sociology of consumption. While none of these is unique to practice theoretic

approaches, I suggest there is currently a risk that these problems will become amplified and more deeply entrenched. This is followed by a discussion of three approaches that can be mobilised by way of response to these challenges. I suggest that these material semiotic approaches are compatible with practice theoretic accounts of consumption and that taken together, they represent some promising responses to the challenges confronting consumption studies. To conclude, I reflect on the unique contributions of practice theoretic accounts, the parameters of consumption scholarship, and the extent to which greater engagement with economic processes necessitates the neglect of cultural processes.

Issues Confronting the Sociology of Consumption

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, consumption was a 'staple of theoretical discourse' (Graber 2011: 489) and a key reference point in characterisations of contemporary societies and social change. The emphasis here was largely on the study of consumer culture. Despite changes in the intellectual vogue (for example waning interest in postmodernism), consumption remains a vibrant field of sociological enquiry. In recent years, the term has been connected to a number of substantive or applied concerns. Key contributions are therefore arising outside the mainstream of sociological theory – in fields such as marketing, environmental policy and public health. Here the emphasis is largely on the study of consumer practice. The sustained, albeit shifting, relevance of consumption has been matched by ongoing tendencies for the term and its study to be met with scepticism and suspicion (see Graeber 2011). Amongst other things, it has been positioned as frivolous, intellectually thin, and a symptom of neoliberalism. While it is almost certainly the case that criticisms from outside of consumption studies are premised on a fundamental misreading of the field, they should nevertheless be taken seriously. Moreover, they gesture to a suite of long-standing issues within the field that warrant consideration. To take each of these in turn:

First is the analytic separation of production and consumption that enabled consumption studies to flourish in the 1980s and 1990s. Prior to this, as already noted, consumption was derived unproblematically from production (Featherstone 1990). Even in the case of the Frankfurt School, for example, the emphasis that appears to be placed on consumption is arguably put in the service of an account that is more interested in the expansion of capitalist production. For consumption to be established as a topic in its own right, it needed to 'cut loose' from theoretical frameworks that privilege production (see Goodman 2002). It is not controversial to suggest perspectives that privilege consumption multiplied across the social sciences under the auspices of the cultural turn (see Miller 1995). While significant insight into the process and experience of consumption has accompanied this separation, the need for reconciliation is becoming increasingly clear. For example, it could be argued that cultural approaches overemphasise meanings and symbols while neglecting the material basis of economic and social life[1]. Similarly, Warde (2014: 297) observes that practice theoretic approaches 'may

[1] That said, some classic cultural studies of consumption – including Mintz's analysis of sugar (1985) and du Gay et al.'s analysis of the Sony Walkman (1997) – kept 'economy' very much in focus.

need supplementing with other frameworks, particularly to capture macro-level or structural aspects of consumption'. The task of reconciliation, however, is not straightforward. The analytical separation of (economic) production and (cultural) consumption has purified these categories and reified them as wholes that cannot easily be put back together again. There is a need for a new conceptual vocabulary that permits thinking across domains of activity that might be thought of as production and those that might be thought of as consumption.

Second is the question of definition. For as long as consumption was derived from production, a rather narrow definition – as shopping, markets to be made, or needs to be met – prevailed. As the study of consumption expanded, so too did the range of activities that were thought of as consumption or consumer behaviour. For example, all manner of topics associated with the study of culture have been talked about as 'consumption'. These range from clothing and musical preferences, through media use and leisure activities, to taste in home furnishings and holiday destinations. Practice theoretic approaches risk opening things up even further. They have formalised an interest in 'non-market' modes of provision (state, domestic and communal – see Warde 1990). Further, the suggestion that consumption is a 'moment' that occurs within and for the sake of practices has been erroneously interpreted as licence to view any activity involving environmentally significant resource use (that is, virtually everything) as germane to the study of consumption (see Evans 2019). The trouble with this expansion is that once the genie is out of the bottle, it becomes hard to redraw the boundaries. If virtually any activity can be thought of as consumption, then the concept ceases to be analytically useful or distinctive. On this point, the issue of the relationship between production and consumption rears its head again. For Graeber (2011:501), the effect of dividing the world into these two spheres[2] is to 'push almost all forms of nonalienated production into the category of consumption'. He suggests that this evinces the limitations of consumption as an analytic category, surmising that it offers little more than a way to think about production that isn't for the market[3]. There is an urgent need to more clearly define what consumption is, and what it is not, and to demonstrate its distinctive analytic value.

Finally, there is the risk that studies of consumption may have reactionary political effects. Early approaches to consumption – derived largely from a Marxian view of political economy – were overwhelmingly critical in their treatment of capitalism, consumerism, excess and affluence. As consumption studies developed and broke with approaches that privilege production, a key refrain was the rejection of critique as misguided, moralistic, and elitist. Cultural studies of consumption highlighted, variously, its significance as a site of creativity, resistance, meaning and pleasure. Rather than viewing consumers as shameless, shallow hedonists or passive, deluded dupes; they were shown to be active agents who engage in complex processes of identity formation, belonging and care. Parallel to this, the

[2] He suggests that this is habit of political economy that should not be imported into the social sciences or cultural analysis.

[3] He gives examples of teenagers forming a band, a game of softball, and buying vegetables to prepare a gazpacho to share with friends.

authenticity and aesthetic legitimacy of consumer cultures was emphasised as a rejoinder to the critique of mass culture. Without disputing the importance and contributions of these developments, it seems credible to suggest that the break with economic production and the privilege accorded to the symbolic over the material has served to mute the critical potential of consumption scholarship. While practice theoretic approaches to consumption studies self-consciously eschew the extremes of cultural studies, they have yet to recover the tradition of critique. The theory emphasises certain aspects of the world – infrastructures, routines, distributed process of normalisation over time – that arguably (see Evans 2019) do not sit easily with more familiar genres and repertoires of critique. Moreover, if the maxim that consumption is a 'moment' that occurs within and for the sake practices is taken seriously, then it becomes harder to establish grounds for the critique of consumption (see Welch 2017). There is a need to develop new resources for critique that are consistent with insights that have been developed into the process, experience and content of consumption.

There is significant overlap between these issues. Consumption studies must confront and respond to these if it is to remain relevant to wider theoretical and disciplinary endeavour or to the societal 'grand challenges' in which it is mobilised. I turn now to a discussion of one possible response to these challenges.

Theories of Practice and Material Semiotics

While this paper is a critical reflection on the status of practice theoretic approaches, it is important to make clear that the challenges outlined above are not unique to the 'practice turn' in consumption studies. As the preceding discussion will have made clear, they are equally relevant to an earlier wave of consumption studies in which cultural approaches dominated (indeed, Graeber's critical reflections make no mention of practice-theoretic approaches). It seems credible, then, that these issues can be linked to the persistent separation of consumption studies and understandings of wider economic processes. This section therefore considers the reconciliation of consumption and economy within practice theoretic repertoires.

When practice theoretic accounts of consumption seek connections to wider economic processes, they draw on a common stock of complementary perspectives. Perhaps most frequent is the Multi-Level Perspective on system transitions (see for example McMeekin and Southerton 2012), which is argued to be compatible with practice-theoretic approaches by virtue of shared interests in 'configurations of heterogenous elements' (Geels et al. 2015: 5), an emphasis on the co-evolution of technology and society, and the space that it makes for consumption. The Systems of Provision approach (Fine 2002) has also been presented as a promising bedfellow (see for example Southerton et al. 2004). This perspective looks to the unity of political and economic processes that underpin the production, distribution, circulation of specific commodities. It therefore offers a 'vertical' account of the factors that shape patterns and changes in consumption. More recently, attention has been paid to Mark Harvey's analysis of Instituted Economic Processes (Harvey 2007 see Wheeler and Glucksmann 2015). This approach views

production, distribution, exchange and consumption as related and interdependent processes that stabilise over time to form distinctive configurations. These ideas are currently being developed further by, for example, linking normative concerns around practices of consumption to the broader moral economies in which they are located (see Wheeler 2018).

My view in this paper is that there are other approaches that have yet to be engaged with but could be utilised to better locate practice theoretic accounts of consumption in the context of wider political and economic processes. I suggest that material semiotic approaches to economy and politics are a useful place to look. My reasons are as follows. First, because I question the extent to which practice theoretic approaches to consumption deal adequately with materials and objects. While they take seriously the role of the non-human in configuring the practices for which consumption occurs, they say very little, for example, about the materiality of markets, processes of commodity consumption, or the enactment of political and economic realities. Second, because in these approaches, attention to technologies, objects and devices does not necessitate the deletion of cultural considerations such as representations or sentiments. On this point, I note that theories of practice can also be considered material semiotic. In addition to the open question of whether they break with cultural theory (cf. Reckwitz 2002), even the most parsimonious and frequently invoked definitions of 'a practice' (see Shove et al. 2012) emphasises meanings or images as a key configurational element[4]. Taken together, then, I suggest that there is significant potential to bring material semiotic approaches to economy and politics together with a material semiotic approach to consumption.

This analysis that follows makes this argument through reference to three bodies of work: i) actor-network approaches to market *agencements*; ii) perspectives on the social life of things, and iii) discussions of ontological politics. In each case, I use brief examples from a recent project on the significance of 'freshness' in the agro-food sector[5] to demonstrate the basis and potential for integration with practice theoretic accounts of consumption. Before getting to this, it is important to present my preliminary or working definition of consumption. I understand consumption as a *process* involving specific 'moments' beyond the act of acquisition. Following Warde (2005), I suggest that consumption also involves appropriation (use, personalisation and incorporation into people's everyday lives) and appreciation (involving personal and symbolic frameworks of judgement and evaluation). To each of these A's, I propose a counterpart D (Evans 2019) such that consumption also involves devaluation (the loss of economic or use value, symbolic failure), divestment (the loss of personal meaning, the unravelling of attachments) and disposal (getting rid of things). These processes can involve goods, services and experiences which can either be accessed and disposed of through market exchanges or alternative channels. Consumers have 'some degree of discretion' in these processes, which are undertaken for

[4] See also Welch (2017) for an erudite discussion of the relationships between theories of practice, culture, and cultural analysis.

[5] Funded by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council, ESRC, ref: ES/N009649/1.

'utilitarian, expressive and contemplative' purposes (see Warde 2005: 137). This definition is provisional and intended to frame engagement with each of the following three perspectives.

Market *Agencements*

A programme of work (following Callon 1998) – which might be termed the 'new' new economic sociology (McFall 2009) – explores how markets are made and done. The concept of market *agencement* describes the various entities that are combined and arranged to pragmatically enact calculations, qualifications and economic behaviour. The approach pays significant attention to 'devices' such as material entities, technologies, data and algorithms. It should be noted, however, that the concept of *agencement* captures the equivalence of, or symmetry between, technical devices and cultural considerations such as advertising and intermediation (see McFall 2014). Consumption studies has proved a key site for the development of these ideas (see for example Dubuisson-Quellier 2003, Brembeck et al. 2007, Cochoy et al. 2017, Fuentes and Fuentes 2018, Grandclément and Nadï 2019). Despite significant overlap with the pre-occupations of practice theory, there has been too little interaction between the two traditions within consumption studies[6] (although see Stigzelius et al. 2018). This section argues that practice theoretic accounts of consumption can be usefully extended through engagement with Callonian perspectives on markets. In order to do so, it zooms in on qualities and processes of qualification (Callon et al. 2002).

In the emerging 'economy of qualities' identified by Callon and colleagues (2002), economic competition and organisation can be analysed via a focus on qualification. In this view, qualities (of products or production processes) are never simply observed, rather:

> All quality is obtained at the end of a process of qualification, and all qualification aims to establish a constellation of characteristics, stabilized at least for a while, which are attached to the product and transform it temporarily into a tradable good in the market (Callon et al. 2002: 199)

It follows that any given product is inherently unstable and that processes of qualification establish the combination of attributes to be considered in order to ascertain whether it meets the relevant quality criteria. These are intrinsic and can be measured. Processes of qualification also position this combination of attributes favourably within the economy of qualities. These are extrinsic qualities that are evaluated subjectively. While not intended as an approach to consumption *per se*, Callon and colleagues are explicit that qualification involves an apparatus of distributed cognition, taken to include consumers. Success in the economy of qualities is dependent on consumer preferences and attachment to the goods proposed to them in the market. Viewed as such, qualification is a process that cuts across of production and consumption.

[6] Much of this work appears in different journals – for example *Consumption, Markets and Culture* or *Journal of Cultural Economy*.

By way of illustration, consider the significance freshness in the production and consumption of food. Freshness is reportedly the most important quality that consumers consider when selecting food produce. It is not, however, a self-evident category given that the year-round availability of fresh produce relies on processes that are anything but natural, including technological interventions (the cold chain, packaging) and increasingly global supply chains (see Freidberg 2009, Jackson et al. 2019). Processes of qualification therefore establish which characteristics are considered when evaluating what is and is not 'fresh'. A good example is the orange juice market, where 'freshness' commands a price premium but the product cannot be referred to as 'fresh' unless it is sold within 36 hours of extraction (see Mylan 2016). Economic agents therefore turn to other methods for qualifying and positioning their products. Orange juice that is 'not from concentrate' and sold in refrigerated cabinets is positioned as 'fresh' in contrast to juice that that has been reconstituted and sold at ambient temperature. The stabilisation of the associations between concentration, temperature and freshness – and the favourable position of chilled, not from concentrate juice in the economy of qualities – is dependent on consumer attachment. The alignment between consumers and producers in the process of qualifying orange juice as fresh is an effect of market *agencements* involving devices (refrigerated cabinets at the point of sale, the rise of domestic refrigerators), representations (the links between fresh orange juice, health and convenience) and the active involvement of consumers in sustaining the distinctions between produce that is 'fresh' and that which is not (Evans and Mylan 2019). A focus on qualities and qualification, then, provides a useful way of thinking across the domains of production and consumption.

It is instructive to reflect further on how consumption is conceptualised in the economy of qualities perspective. The importance of consumption is clearly acknowledged, however its relevance is limited to purchasing behaviour (see Miller 2002). Franck Cochoy (2008) has encouraged much greater attention to consumption and consumers, developing concepts that attend to qualitative calculations (*qualculation*) and the collective aspects of consumer choice (*calqulation*). While these represent significant contributions both to consumption studies and the economy of qualities perspective, it could be argued that the advances are still limited by not looking beyond the moment of acquisition (Evans and Mylan 2019). Two further arguments follow from this observation. The first is that practice-theoretic approaches contribute key resources for conceptualising consumption as a process involving multiple 'moments'. Accepting that the economy of qualities perspective is limited by its partial treatment of consumption, theories of practice could be mobilised as a complementary approach that offers a more comprehensive account. The second, perhaps contradictory, argument is that engagement with Callonian perspectives on markets offers the basis to refine my provisional definition of consumption. A case could be made for replacing the 3As with the single concept of 'attachment'. There is a sense in which appropriation and appreciation are implicated in processes of attachment, which necessarily involves a moment of acquisition. To the extent that consumption must be recognised as a process that extends beyond attachment, this might be dealt with by replacing the 3Ds with the single concept of 'detachment'. Relatedly, this approach intimates that consumption studies should focus principally on markets rather

than other modes of provision. The case for refining the gaze of consumption studies is now discussed further in connection with the themes of commodities and commodification.

The Social Life of Things

Practice theoretic approaches to consumption have militated away from a concern with commodities and commodification (see Evans 2018). In contrast, the various contributions to Arjun Appaduari's landmark collection (1986) *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* focus on how objects are made – both materially and semiotically – as commodities. The core idea is that objects move and circulate between 'regimes of value' such that they have cultural biographies. (Kopytoff 1986). It follows that studying 'things-in-motion' can illuminate their 'human and social context' (Appadurai 1986:5). This section argues that a focus on commodity biographies is a useful way to connect practice theoretic accounts of consumption to broader economic activities.

The methodological invocation to 'follow the thing' has been mobilised extensively (notably Cook et al. 2004, see also Cook et al. 2006) to address how disparate global relationships converge in the commodity form. The idea here is that as things become commodities 'the intricate geography of production and the myriad social relationships embedded in the system' (Harvey 1990: 422) are obscured. It follows that socially or ecologically exploitative conditions of production are often not visible to consumers at the point of purchase[7]. Studies that follow the thing therefore ask questions about the people, places and relationships that lie behind everyday consumer goods. They reconnect consumption to production, confronting some of the political and ethical questions that this raises. These accounts arguably fall short of their potential to connect producers and consumers because they 'fudge' their engagement with consumption (Cook et al. 2006: 661). By starting with a particular commodity and then working backwards along the supply chain, this approach has had rather more to say about 'production' than it has about processes and experiences of consumption. It is instructive to note, then, that an orientation to the social life and cultural biographies of things underpins a number of key advances in consumption studies (e.g. Gregson and Crewe 2003, Lash and Lury 2007), including Daniel Miller's accounts (e.g. Miller 1998) of how cold objects of commercial exchange (commodities) are appropriated and transformed into the material culture of everyday life (effectively de-commodified). It is perhaps curious that these accounts have not adopted or been explicitly framed in terms of 'following the thing'.

The approach of 'following the thing' could usefully be extended to encompass a focus on processes of consumption beyond the moment of acquisition. Doing so could result in more integrated and comprehensive accounts of commodification and de-commodification than are currently offered by the production-bias of existing commodity biographies. Accepting that qualities and qualification are useful concepts for thinking across production and consumption, I suggest that following the thing is a promising methodological tool for empirically accessing these processes. Returning to case of freshness,

[7] In contrast to David Harvey's 'silent grapes', some forms of ethical consumption are premised on making the conditions of production visible and transparent (see Goodman 2004).

by following particular food products through supply chains and into processes of consumption (involving purchase, preparation, eating and disposal) it becomes clear that they are subject to ongoing qualification trials. Food manufacturers and retailers continually monitor and measure the 'freshness' of produce – for example bananas – as they move from plantations and packing facilities, into shipping containers and logistic hubs, then ripening facilities and distribution centres, to stores. These qualification trials ensure that the produce remains 'fresh' until the point of sale, and that it adheres to the relevant safety and quality standards. Consumers will then evaluate the freshness of food before deciding to buy it, but they may also assess it again when deciding whether to eat it, freeze it, use it for something else, or get rid of it. These ongoing qualification trials across the domains of production and consumption involve a range of material and semiotic elements including sensory engagement, regulations, representations, objects and devices. Where Appaduari's (1986) suggestion was to focus on the material to illuminate the social, the approach of 'following the thing' can be interpreted as consistent with the methodological habits of actor-network approaches insofar as it traces the associations between heterogenous phenomena in order to capture commodity biographies as they unfold in real time.

The integrative potential of following the thing necessitates some modifications to practice theoretic accounts of consumption. It foregrounds commodities rather than services or experiences, effectively conceptualizing 'consumer goods' as the object of consumption studies. There are good reasons for doing so, not least because it offers a very clear route for linking 'consumption' to 'production'. Rather than having to piece together separate but 'complementary' accounts that may have been built on differing methodological foundations, the logic of 'following' a particular commodity along the supply chain and through to final disposal permits a degree of symmetry that may help the task of integration. By properly acknowledging processes of consumption and developing more comprehensive cultural biographies of things, there exists some interesting opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration. For example, engineers and environmental scientists have similar interests in developing holistic accounts – using Life Cycle Analysis (LCA) techniques – that quantify or model the impacts of particular commodities from 'cradle to grave'. Consumption studies is uniquely placed to inform the assumptions that are made about 'the consumer' in these models (see Laitala and Klepp 2015). Additionally, if the sociology of consumption is looking to develop new understandings of 'things' then it seems sensible to engage with LCA. LCA arguably (see Freidberg 2014: 186) models the kinds of material and ecological processes that contemporary developments in posthuman theory (Bennett 2009) suggest it is important to take account of.

Most importantly, a focus on commodities and commodification make it difficult to ignore the ethics and politics of consumption. Where it is very easy to discount aesthetic critiques of consumption as moralistic, misguided and elitist; it is far less easy to dismiss insights into the conditions and consequences of commodity production. To the extent that commodities can be recontextualised and recognised as a site of culture, creativity and sociality, the ghost at the banquet is that their biographies carry traces of their history. There is a fundamental tension here. On the one hand, commodities are seldom neutral

resources that feed innocently into processes of consumption. On the other, it is no longer tenable to derive an account of consumption as a straightforward consequence of production. There is a need to think through the politics of consumption in ways that are consistent with contemporary developments in consumption studies. It is to this that I now turn.

Ontological Politics

Practice theoretic approaches to consumption are now starting to engage with questions of power and politics. I do not wish to single out specific examples but there are growing tendencies for papers to offer a succinct and lucid summary of the theoretical position, arguing that it works very well in terms of conceptualizing and analysing consumption, but that it is ill suited to consideration of the political and ethical challenges that it raises. Many of the key features that are emphasised when theories of practice are summarised – principally that 'the social' is a relational effect of practices that are comprised of heterogeneous elements – have much in common with actor-network and related approaches. A key theme in these approaches is the idea of ontological multiplicity (see for example Law and Lien 2013). The idea here is that reality is not something to be observed, rather, it is something that is done. It is done in and through practices, which are understood as 'relations that are heterogeneously material and semiotic' (Law and Singleton 2014). Since these practices vary, so too do the realities that they enact. For at least two decades, questions have been asked about the kind of politics that is possible once ontology has been reshaped by ANT (Mol 1999). This section argues practice theoretic approaches to consumption need not abandon their ontological commitments in order to engage with the ethics and politics of consumption. In order to do so, it looks outside of consumption studies to consider the politics of ontological multiplicity.

It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss ontological politics in detail, however a number of key points stand out. First, the emphasis on realities – more than one, less than many – and the work that it takes to assemble and sustain them distances ontological multiplicity from either perspectivalism or constructivism (see Mol 1999). The approach is a far cry from the relativist tendencies that have arguably depoliticised consumption studies, for example its associations with postmodernism. Second, and relatedly, acknowledging the existence of multiple realities makes it possible to ask questions about each of these realities and the relationships between them. For example, attention could be paid to 'how and why ontological difference is made and managed, by whom, and to what effect' (Lavau 2013: 429). Attention could also be paid to the ways in which different enactments combine, clash with and collaborate with one another (Mol 1999). Ontological multiplicity is 'inherently political' (Yates et al. 2017:4) by virtue of the ways in which different realities are asserted, prioritized and naturalized. The question of which realities might be preferable if there are several on offer begs further questions as to what the options are, if they really are options, and how to choose between them (see Mol 1999). Finally, and most important for the argument at hand, is the idea that the enactment of any given object can

interfere in or modulate other realities. For example, Annemarie Mol[8] demonstrates how different ways of enacting anemia can interfere in 'a phenomenon that is far more extensively politicised: that of *sex difference* (Mol 1999: 81).'

Returning now to consumption studies, concerns about how to deal with politics may relate to where attention has been focused following the turn to practice. By looking 'down' to the moments that occur within and for the sake of practice, the approach has been misinterpreted as better suited to the study of 'small' phenomena than to large scale configurations (see Schatzki 2016, Welch 2017). In contrast, actor-network approaches have looked 'up' to consider the realities that are enacted by practices. Practice theoretic approaches to consumption could be extended by looking up to see how political and economic realities are enacted or modulated by practices. Returning again to the example of freshness, this is an 'object' that has multiple ontologies (Jackson et al. 2019). Depending on how it gets enacted, there are profound consequences for how the extensively politicised phenomenon (cf. Mol 1999) of plastic packaging is understood. In a reality where freshness is enacted as a matter of minimizing time and distance between harvesting and consumption or as sensory engagement with food, packaging is a problem. It permits the adulteration of food and prevents people from handling produce to assess its quality and freshness for themselves. In a reality where freshness is enacted as a matter of maximizing shelf life or as a technological accomplishment – packaging is a good thing. It keeps food 'fresher' for longer and permits communication with the consumer about the produce inside (cf. Cochoy 2011, Hawkins 2018).

Political and economic realities are modulated depending on the practices that enact freshness. For example, in the reality where packaging is a problem – pressure might be put on supermarkets and food corporations to reduce reliance on single-use plastics or there may be market advantages for alternative food networks. In a reality where packaging is a good thing, supply chains will be organized around the requirement and expectation that fresh food is packaged. The political challenge might be one of persuading consumers to use and store food correctly by, for example, not removing produce from the packaging after purchase. Resolution of tensions such as these is not straightforward, however there is no reason to view their consideration as incompatible with practice theoretic approaches to consumption. A focus on the moments of consumption that occur within and for the sake of practices can usefully extend accounts of how those practices modulate political and economic realities. At a basic level, patterns of consumption (for example avoiding packaging, engaging with alternative food networks) will vary depending on which reality is preferred. Similarly, processes of consumption beyond the moment of acquisition are clearly important here (for example handling produce in accordance with instructions). In sum, the reshaping of ontology in consumption studies need not be seen as a double-edged sword that has brought greater analytic clarity but reactionary political effects.

[8] Mol's *The Body Multiple* (1999) is perhaps the most famous account of ontological multiplicity.

Discussion and Conclusions

The preceding sections have engaged with debates concerning the status and impact of practice theories within the sociology of consumption. My key argument is that despite claims to the contrary, they offer only a partial account of materials and objects. Concomitantly, I have argued that engagement with a wider range of material semiotic approaches offers a way to better locate consumption in the context of wider economic processes. While I do not claim to have exhausted the potential of material semiotics, I suggest that the perspectives considered here are both compatible with practice-theoretic approaches to consumption and more suitable than the 'complementary accounts' (Warde 2014:296) that are currently favoured. For example, the Systems of Provision perspective effectively uses consumption to talk about production (cf. Goodman 2002) and does not consider processes beyond acquisition. Similarly, the Multi-Level Perspective grants only limited attention to consumption and offers no clear mechanism for reconciling a multi-scalar model with the flat ontology of practice theoretic approaches (although see Welch and Yates 2018).

The material semiotic perspectives that have been discussed here are ontologically compatible with practice theoretical accounts of consumption and share interests in practical routines, heterogenous associations (between economic and non-economic actors, humans and non-humans, technologies and representations, producers and consumers), and stabilised social action. They belong to the same 'family' of theories and can thus be reasonably thought of as practice *theories* (cf. Jones and Murphy 2011). If a particular version of practice theory is bringing significant advances in consumption studies but is less adept at accounting for wider economic processes, then engagement with other theories of practice seems logical. The integration proposed here offers a framework for exploring the intersection of everyday life and political economy. Future studies of consumption could usefully deploy this in order to develop comparative understandings of how configurations and relations vary across cultural contexts or across commodity chains. By characterising different cultures of consumption or instituted economic processes in this way, it is hoped that these conceptual resources will be relevant beyond specific empirical interests in consumption[9]. Viewed as such, the unique contributions of practice theories – plural – to the study of consumption and broader sociological endeavour have yet to be exhausted.

The material semiotic perspectives presented here appear open to greater engagement with processes of consumption and are meaningfully extended by practice theoretic accounts of consumption. Nevertheless, forays into these complementary approaches provoke some further reflection on the parameters of consumption studies. Theories of practice – and the cultural turn before them – have productively expanded understandings of what consumption is. While this has proved theoretically and empirically generative, there are concerns that about conceptual slippage (Graeber 2011). The working definition of consumption proposed earlier in this article was intended as a response to these concerns

[9] A criticism of existing practice theoretic approaches to consumption is that they are distancing the field from wider theoretical and disciplinary concerns (cf. Evans 2019)

and an attempt to refine the gaze of consumption studies. Taken together, the approaches presented here suggest that this definition is still too broad. The preceding analysis intimates that the sociological study of consumption need only focus on market exchanges, moments of attachment and detachment, and processes of commodity consumption. This narrowing of focus represents one possible (and this is necessarily a matter for further debate) response to the suite of challenges confronting the sociology of consumption - namely its relationship to production, the charges of political conservativism, and the question of definitional clarity. Effectively, the suggestion is that activities can be named and identified as 'consumption' by virtue of their location in a capitalist instituted economic process. While this risks looking like a return to 'the old economism' (Warde 2014: 297), it should be noted that consumption – and nuanced understandings of its dynamics – is here permitted to sit on an equal footing with production, distribution and exchange.

The bigger issue, of course, is that the recovery of political economy in consumption studies risks a weakening of its associations with cultural analysis. One interpretation is that the development of consumption studies is necessarily circular by virtue of ineradicable tensions within the field. Generic positions may fall out of fashion as a result of opposing 'turns', but they can return to favour and be redefined in a more accommodating manner (cf. Warde 2014). Another interpretation is that material semiotic approaches to consumption and economy need not be considered in opposition to cultural perspectives. The literature on market *agencements* encourages a view that the opposition between competing theories of consumption is misguided and unnecessary. For example, Franck Cochoy and colleagues note that 'social and technical forces are not […] mutually exclusive […] it would be absurd, for example, to replace the study of consumer culture by studies of consumer devices since both contribute to market action and complement each other' (Cochoy et al. 2016:6). In this view, culture remains central to explanations of consumption and economy. Perhaps the only difference is that it mitigates the temptation to view too broad a range of activities or cultural practices – related to cosmetics, cities, sexualities, food, music and so on – as 'consumption'. To end, then, I suggest that there is an urgent need for further debate in order to achieve greater clarity about what consumption is and what it is not. Whatever the future holds for the sociology of consumption, this is likely to remain a key challenge.

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